



The Palestine Sermons

Khaled Abou El Fadl

EDITED BY JOSEF LINNHOFF

The Palestine Sermons

In this collection of twenty-five Islamic sermons, Khaled Abou El Fadl, distinguished law professor and classically trained Islamic jurist, responds to some of the major developments that have taken place between April 2018 and May 2024 relating to Israel-Palestine, leading up to and including the aftermath of 7 October 2023. Part Qur'anic exegesis and part socio-ethical commentary, this volume illuminates the path forward for Muslims and people of conscience amid the great challenges of injustice and oppression in our world.



"Jerusalem affirms Islam as the universal religion of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. It symbolizes the primordial message of Islam that long predates the prophecy of Muhammad. It represents that Islam is a gift to humanity, and not simply an Arabian peculiarity."

(Chapter 5: Why Jerusalem Matters)

"Gaza is a watershed moment. Everything has to change. Our approach to reading our sources has to change. What books we use must change. The way we read the Qur'an has to change. The way we relate to one another has to change. What is happening in Gaza and our powerlessness is a direct lesson from God...After Gaza, everything has to change, and nothing else matters."

(Chapter 24: After Gaza, Everything Must Change)

"The present work...offers an original contribution to the extensive literature on Israel-Palestine. There is perhaps no other work that engages the conflict from a distinctly Islamic theological perspective, nor in the context of a collection of sermons...The result is a volume that deepens our understanding not just of the Palestine question, but of the Islamic message itself."

—Josef Linnhoff, Editor, Introduction to *The Palestine Sermons*



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The Palestine Sermons

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*To the people of Palestine,
In truth*



The establishment by Israel of settlements in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, has no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law.

- United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334 (23 Dec 2016)



The United Nations took a strong stand against apartheid and, over the years, an international consensus was built which helped to bring an end to this iniquitous system...but we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians.

- Nelson Mandela



Palestine is not just a country or a name, it is an idea, an aspiration, and a symbol for everyone who has lost and longed for restitution and recompense.

- Ghada Karmi





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5. The fifth part of the paper discusses the implications of the study.

6. The sixth part of the paper discusses the limitations of the study.

7. The seventh part of the paper discusses the future research.

8. The eighth part of the paper discusses the acknowledgments.

9. The ninth part of the paper discusses the references.

10. The tenth part of the paper discusses the appendices.

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FOREWORD

.....

Picture the scene. A massive army of eighty thousand men under the command of the righteous King Saul approach the Jordan River from the east, thirsty and exhausted from days of traveling under the hot sun. As they arrive at the clear, fresh water, they are told that God has “tested you with a river” and are forbidden to drink from it except a mere sip (Q 2:249). Thousands fail the test. Unable to control their urges, most drink their fill without restraint, with only three hundred and thirteen men remaining steadfast and true to the command of God. In the Qur’anic narrative, this test of the river occurred right before the Prophet David undertook the unexpected victory over Goliath (Q 2:251). The passage in Surah al-Baqarah tells us how those who guzzled the water doubted the possibility of Divine aid and victory. They wavered, believing themselves no match for Goliath and his warriors. But the true believers were different, for they reassured themselves, “How many times has a small force vanquished a mighty army by the Will of God! And God is with the steadfast” (Q 2:249). Before victory came to pass, the parable of the forbidden river distinguished the sincere believers from the stragglers, the weak of faith, the hypocrites. Only the finest stood firm in that decisive hour. It is significant that the story of the forbidden river and the army took place in the Holy Land—more

specifically, at the site of the baptism of Jesus. Today, humanity is being tested with its own river in the same land of Palestine.

It is a river of blood.

As I write this Foreword, we have just entered the tenth month of a harrowing genocide in Gaza and over seventy-five years of stolen homes, uprooted olive trees, and weeping, ancient stones. The powers that be have declared that this is the new normal, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. Gaza is changing the course of history by unmasking the farce of our global system. The so-called “rules-based order” has been exposed as a *ruse*-based order. Just like the test of the river, the “river” of Gaza is sorting the hypocrites from the sincere. The pretenders from the true. The tyrants from the justice-seekers. Those who sow corruption from those who strive against it. The currents of this river are so strong that any traces of ambiguity have long been washed away. Few words can capture the scale of human suffering in Gaza, the biggest slaughterhouse of children in modern history. The horror is livestreamed daily on our phones. The Palestinian people—brutalized, starving, exhausted, limbless, and orphaned under bombs in makeshift tents—are resisting with every breath, standing in the face of a nuclear superpower alone.

But what is Palestine if not a mirror to the state of the Islamic world today? The river of blood gushes from Gaza through to Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond, snaking its way across the Muslim world. Palestine may represent the *Ummah*’s darkest hour, but it is not a random event. This river of blood is a result of what hardened hearts, minds, and hands have sown. It is what happens when a community abandons its core, foundational principles in exchange for expedient, worldly, foundational falsehoods. Disunity, arrogance, greed, and pride: these are some of the falsehoods plaguing the Muslim condition today.

The roadmap to identifying these maladies is laid out in the Qur'an. The stories of the prophets offer a mirror to our current affairs—if we only reflect. The people of Palestine are often—and rightly so—invoked as a modern-day David, small but mighty, fighting the fierce enemy, Israel. The story of David and Goliath is a timeless heroic narrative. The tale of a smaller and weaker party, blessed and aided by God, gaining victory over a stronger tyrannical army offers a message of hope and inspiration for the oppressed. But we seldom pay attention to the precursor events to these unlikely victories. What preceded David's triumph over Goliath was much chaos, betrayal, disarray, and failure. In the Qur'anic narrative of the forbidden river, when the Children of Israel asked God for the best figure to lead them, God sent them Saul because of his righteousness, knowledge, and physical strength. But they rejected him on account of his lowly status; Saul was said to be from the poorer and weaker tribes, so he was spurned because of his community's arrogance, supremacy, and pride. This failure to accept Saul as a Divinely appointed king was because their hearts were not firm on the truth and the command of God. They were focused on the wrong things: class, wealth, and racial purity rather than knowledge, righteousness, and suitability for leadership. They failed the test of the river before it even began.

This is exactly our current condition as Muslims. The Muslim world has been tested with the weakest, most corrupt, and most hypocritical scholars and rulers because, as a community, our priorities have long been in the wrong place. After being ravaged by colonialism, we no longer rallied behind the core characteristics of true leadership: Prophetic knowledge, principle, and integrity. We no longer valued what is just and true. We chased after the fickle mirages of autocratic power, wealth, charisma, and status. Thus

was our downfall. As a result, we today see tightlipped, impotent Muslim rulers idly watch the river of blood as it flows from Gaza. We see compromised scholars betray the Qur'anic command for justice and bend their heads in humiliation and fear of worldly powers. Save for a few, most Muslim rulers and scholarly elites have chosen self-preservation and silence. The river of blood in Gaza is also a river of treachery and collusion. With leaders like these, it is no wonder the Muslim world is in the sorry state that it is in today.

But it is not only the Qur'an that points us to the reasons behind the collapse of Muslim leadership. History teaches us, too. The loss of Palestine was the grandest heist of the twentieth century, stolen in broad daylight and handed over to Zionists under the guise of a new, progressive age of "civilization," "progress," and "modernity." How else to explain that the same year—1948—saw both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights *and* the *Nakba*, the violent ethnic cleansing of Palestine? Palestinians could see from the very beginning that there is nothing "post" about the post-colonial world order. They have ever since got less and less of their rights, lands, and dignity with each passing day. In the same era, the opium of nationalism spread like wildfire as the Muslim world was carved into colonially constructed nation states. The rest of the Muslim world enjoyed its false sense of "sovereignty" and accepted its bridle, divorced from the lonesome plight of the Palestinian people, fooled into believing that the same system that gave birth to their "sovereign" states could guarantee their safety and protection. The neo-liberal "ruse-based order" deluded Muslims into abandoning God's command to be truly united (Q 3:103) and ignoring the words of the Prophet Muhammad: "Muslims are like one body; if the eye is sore, the whole body aches, and if the head aches, the whole body aches." What is the Muslim body today if not diseased, aching, and wounded?

It is no wonder, then, that Palestinians are left to fend for themselves. What is happening today in Gaza is a clarion call to introspect and observe our own prejudices and tyranny as Muslims. Do our mosques and communities reflect the Qur'anic ideals of respect and equality of all humankind? The Qur'an warns us that supremacist arrogance was the primordial sin of Satan, who decried, "I am better than him!" (Q 38:77). Can we say that we are wholly innocent of this scourge as a community? When we are finally free from tyranny, will we dehumanize and discard others based on their status, race, or ethnicity? Will we adopt a "chosen people" Islam based on an inherent sense of superiority, or will we derive our honor from embodying the characteristics that God and His Prophet love? Do we, as Muslims, represent the three hundred and thirteen, faithful and resolute, or do we better resemble the thousands guzzling on the banks of the river?

The Palestine Sermons by Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl is a powerful tribute to the Palestinian people. This precious collection of sermons reminds us that Islam is, at heart, an ethical revolution and that we cannot be mere spectators in this fight for the soul of humanity. Professor Abou El Fadl calls upon us to draw strength and solace from the timeless message of the Qur'an and to deepen our role as active moral agents in this world. We learn in the following pages that a liberated Palestine is the key to a liberated *Ummah*; the road to a free Palestine passes through a free Amman, Cairo, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Jakarta, and Dakar. We see how Palestine is a means of restoring what has been lost of Muslim unity and integrity. In an age of darkness when so many are failing the test and rushing to drink from the river, Abou El Fadl reminds us that it is our duty to hold firm, reject despair, and continue working toward justice—in short, to be modern-day descendants of the three hundred and thirteen.

THE PALESTINE SERMONS
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If Palestine alone suffices to explain the plight of modern Islam, *The Palestine Sermons* points to the unrealized potential of Islam to be a source of “mercy to all humankind” (Q 21:107).

For what is Palestine if not the starkest rallying cry against a disunited, arrogant, and prideful *Ummah*? A forsaken Palestine is a forsaking of Islam, and a free Palestine is a freeing of Islam from the chokehold of tyranny.

May that vision finally come to be. May our children inherit a better, more just world.

DR. FARAH EL-SHARIF

PhD Islamic Studies, Harvard University (2022)

Substack: Sermons at the Court

August 2024

INTRODUCTION

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This volume was born of a crisis. On 7 October 2023, Palestinian fighters launched an unprecedented assault into Israel in which they broke out of the Gaza Strip, entered the Israeli mainland, and killed over a thousand people while also taking over two hundred hostages. Israel immediately announced its intention to rescue the hostages and “destroy Hamas” for the attack. The violence that Israel has since unleashed against a besieged civilian population, over half of whom are children, in one of the most densely populated areas on earth, is almost beyond belief. The sheer scale of destruction and loss in Gaza is staggering. At the time of writing, up to forty thousand Palestinians have been killed, including fourteen thousand children. But the true death toll is likely far higher than these official figures. Tiny white shrouds have become a tragic symbol of a war on Gaza that has killed an average of one child every fifteen minutes—a figure without parallel in the modern age. Israel has targeted not just lives, but livelihoods. Entire neighborhoods have been flattened. Hospitals and schools have been bombed. Hundreds of mosques and heritage sites lie in ruins. “Gaza” is now a byword for genocide, one livestreamed for the world to witness. There is a clear sense that the world has changed since October 2023. The violence has been so extreme, the suffering so great, that Gaza has become for many

a watershed moment, a line in the sand. Where we go from here is yet to become clear.

Perhaps the first step in times like these is to remind ourselves of some basic facts. The Israel-Palestine conflict did not begin in October 2023, nor is the question of Israel-Palestine solely about Israel or Palestine. The question of Palestine is, ultimately, a question of whether human rights are universal and whether settler colonialism is a thing of the past or the present. In the West, Palestine has become a litmus test for free speech and freedom of expression, including the right to protest. In the Muslim world, Palestine exposes the betrayal of Arab and Muslim governments. The sad truth is that it is countries like South Africa—not Muslim governments—that have taken concrete steps to defend Palestinians on the international stage. The same Israeli government that lays waste to Gaza has, in recent years, achieved unprecedented rapprochement with Arab regimes. And many Muslim religious scholars, including in the West, either enjoy close ties with these regimes or confront their complicity with silence. In one way or another, the question of Israel-Palestine affects us all.

All these issues, and more, are addressed in the pages that follow. As I saw the violence in Gaza unfold, I found myself asking the same question as so many others: “What to do?” As Editor-in-Chief at The Institute for Advanced Usuli Studies (“The Usuli Institute”), I had edited several volumes of Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl’s sermons in a series called *The Prophet’s Pulpit*. I knew that Professor Abou El Fadl was uniquely qualified and could offer a perspective that few could match. As a distinguished name in academia, he is one of the world’s leading Muslim thinkers and a respected expert in both the Islamic and Western intellectual traditions. He is a prominent scholar of human rights whose accomplishments include being the first

Muslim board member of Human Rights Watch and the recipient of the University of Oslo's Human Rights Award in 2007. He has also been raising the alarm about events in Palestine for quite some time. The question of "What to do?", then, at least in my own case, was simple. I channeled my pain and anger into what I knew best. The result is the present work.

The Palestine Sermons is a collection of twenty-five sermons and one public address (included as an Appendix) that Professor Abou El Fadl delivered between April 2018 and May 2024 in response to ongoing developments relating to Israel-Palestine. This was, in fact, a short but extremely significant period in the history of the conflict. The following pages cover a period that includes then-President Trump's so-called "Deal of the Century," the normalization accords between Israel and several Arab regimes, the assassination of the Palestinian-American journalist, Shireen Abu Akleh, and the election of the most right-wing government in Israeli history, among other key events. The present work, then, chronicles a crucial period that would eventually culminate in the ongoing horrors in Gaza.

Yet it does so from an unusual or unexpected angle, offering an original contribution to the extensive literature on Israel-Palestine. There is perhaps no other work that engages the conflict from a distinctly Islamic theological perspective, nor in the context of a collection of sermons. The present work shows us what a learned and authoritative Muslim voice can contribute to the Palestine question—and what we miss by its absence. In what follows, we learn of the true significance of Jerusalem to Muslim theology and history. We learn how Palestine is a microcosm of the ethical issues plaguing the Muslim world at large. We see how timeless truths from the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition relate to one of the major moral issues of our time. The result is a volume that deepens our

understanding not just of the Palestine question, but of the Islamic message itself.

It is my sincere hope that the present work attracts and inspires a broad readership of academics, lay readers, and activists, Muslim and non-Muslim, in the West and the Muslim-majority world. The pages that follow do not aim to give an in-depth political or historical account of the conflict. There are already many such works, nor is this the main purpose of a sermon. The present work is above all an act of witness by one scholar to the truth and justice of the Palestinian cause. It is also a testament to the power and potential of the weekly sermon itself, a practice commanded by the Qur'an (Q 62:9) and inaugurated by the Prophet Muhammad. More accessible than academic texts or human rights reports, more emotive than journalism articles or opinion pieces, the current volume is a case study of what a sermon could and should represent for the Muslim community and for faith communities in general. The fact that most sermons, in most Muslim spaces, come nowhere near this standard does not affect the importance of the principle itself.



The method used in selecting the sermons should be explained. This was, in many ways, a difficult volume to put together. It is a challenge to publish on any topic amid an ongoing, ever-changing reality on the ground. At some point a line must be drawn, however arbitrary, for the sake of the publication process. Nor is this an exhaustive collection of sermons by Professor Abou El Fadl on the question of Israel-Palestine. Far from it. Professor Abou El Fadl has delivered many more sermons on the issue than can be captured in a single volume. In what follows, I have chosen those sermons that

responded directly to some of the major developments of recent years and that addressed the question of Palestine from a range of different angles. But much more remains online and unpublished. Any act of testimony, even if incomplete, is better than none at all.

I have followed the same method for editing the sermons as that used in *The Prophet's Pulpit* series. There is a small amount of crossover. Two of the following chapters—"Why Jerusalem Matters" and "The Night Journey"—were previously published in Volumes II and III of *The Prophet's Pulpit* series, respectively, and reappear here to complete a standalone volume on Palestine. I have also tweaked the presentation slightly, foregrounding the dates of each sermon to give readers an immediate sense of context that should help them understand each sermon on its own terms. Editing is a highly subjective process. There were inevitable problems in deciding what to keep, delete, and rearrange. Each sermon presented its own challenges. Instances of repetition were typically abridged or deleted or, in a small number of cases, preserved for rhetorical effect. In several sermons, I restructured the order of paragraphs to fully bring out the ideas conveyed therein. What I have tried to achieve for readers is a clear and accessible text that retains, as much as possible, the very words used by Professor Abou El Fadl and that preserves his authentic style, tone, and voice. The hope is that readers can hear the Professor and the original sermons in the text, while still finding the written prose clear, easy to follow, and engaging.

I am thankful to all those who helped in the publication of this volume. Dalia Abou El Fadl provided an excellent first draft of many of the sermons. Wietske Merison offered first-rate proofreading and fact-checking of the entire text, several times over. Nina Linnhoff meticulously combed through the text and footnotes with professionalism and diligence, spotting things I never could. Grace Song steered

the work through to final publication. But the greatest thanks must go to Professor Abou El Fadl himself for demonstrating through his sermons the power and potential of the Islamic message in an age marred by ugliness and oppression.

DR. JOSEF LINNHOF

July 2024

A NOTE ON PRESENTATION

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The following is a list of editorial guidelines that have been generally followed throughout to impose a degree of structure and uniformity upon the text. Key concerns have included presentation, ease of reading, and preserving the tone and spirit of the original sermons while assisting readers not familiar with Arabic.

Professor Abou El Fadl often cites from the Qur'an in the original Arabic before explaining or paraphrasing—but not translating—the verse or passage in English. In such cases, translations are usually taken from *The Study Quran* (New York: HarperOne, 2015) and indicated in the text by “SQ.” All other instances, including when Professor Abou El Fadl offers his own translation of the Qur'an, are indicated by “Q.”

The intermittent use of Arabic terms is largely preserved but, in most cases, an English translation is inserted in parentheses after the first mention. For example: “*khutbah* (sermon).” Arabic terms that have become part of the English language or that defy simple translation, such as *jihad*, *Sunna*, or *hijab*, are not followed by parentheses. This involves a degree of subjectivity as to which terms are considered as such. All Arabic terms are included in the Glossary of Terms.

Professor Abou El Fadl occasionally expresses an idea or a turn of phrase in *both* English and Arabic. For ease of reading, in these cases, English has been preferred. In a small number of cases, the corresponding Arabic term has been included in parentheses.

The transliteration system avoids diacritics and includes ‘*ayn* and *hamza*.

Blessings that traditionally accompany the mention of both the Prophet and God, such as “peace be upon him,” both in English and Arabic, are omitted.

Anglicized names for the prophets have been chosen, i.e., Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, not Ibrahim, Musa, and ‘Isa. In the same vein, the Anglicized “God” has generally been chosen over Allah. The sole exception to this is in Chapter 12.

Anglicized plurals have been chosen, i.e., *fatwas* over *fatawa*, also *imams*, *hadiths*.

Dates are given in the Islamic *Hijri* and then Common Era format. Dates of death are included after the mention of key historical figures from the Islamic intellectual tradition to offer further context.

Footnotes have been deliberately kept to a minimum. The exceptions are to cite *hadith* reports, further explain background context that may elude readers, and provide links to relevant secondary materials.

All Usuli Institute content cited in the footnotes can be found at The Usuli Institute’s YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/c/TheUsuliInstitute>.

The spelling of Arabic terms largely follows that found in Professor Abou El Fadl’s book, *The Search for Beauty in Islam: A Conference of the Books* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). The same applies for both the Glossary of Terms and the Selected Biographies.